

Moving On and Forgiveness

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Life does say no! Even the Buddha explains that life is filled with suffering; however within our experiences of pain there is the simultaneous beauty of nature. As much as our life can say no, we still have the choice to have our glass half full. This paradox of "damn if we do and damn if we don't" actually provides us with grist for happiness, especially if we widen our perspective and recognize the beauty of life's potential or we can fall prey to the alternative of locking ourselves into a world of ongoing hurt. Within this framework, people get into relationships, not all of which are sustained and continue. Nearly 65% of first marriages in the USA end in divorce and approximately 50% of school age children live in a family going through a transition. This alone can be traumatic but if it isn't dealt with in a civil manner, it could have severe consequences for adults and children alike.

Joey, in his early forties, came in for therapy after his recent separation from his wife Judy of eighteen years. They have one child, Susan who is sixteen. Joey said that his marriage to Judy was one of being better friends than lovers. "It was easy working with her regarding the house and parenting, there just isn't any passion or romance." They had tried couple counseling several times but it would end with Susan continuing in individual therapy. Joey felt disappointed and frustrated, but always thought that things would eventually work out. Joey would vividly recall the passion and connection that occurred when they first met, "we were best friends and lovers, and everything seemed wonderful." "Things just went sour after Susan was born, not the joy of having and raising her, but the romance and closeness we once had."

About a year prior to Joey moving out of their house and into an apartment, Judy expressed a need to fulfill herself and eventually move forward as an independent person. Although, it was not surprising to Joey, he felt that there may still be a chance to reconcile and renew the spark they had when they met. Susan was very mature for her age, and although saddened by the news, she seemed to understand and was glad for the civility and friendship that Joey and Judy demonstrated toward each other. When Joey was asked what it was that he was not getting at this moment he expressed a sincere desire to have his family intact. His parents had divorced and he was thirteen and could still feel the pain and confusion dealing with two very angry parents. He said that he intellectually understood that it was time to end his marriage, but his body was not agreeing with this. Joey was not sleeping and was feeling anxious, guilty, and confused about his own potential for the future. This was initially addressed in his therapy, as normal stages of grief, however Joey needed to address the process of forgiving since this could be the context for the resolution of his confusion and eventually bring him peace.

In his book, "Forgive For Good," Fred Luskin identified nine steps for attaining forgiveness and peace. This model of forgiveness has been successfully researched and demonstrated statistically significant improvement in physical and emotional well being in people who were taught how to forgive. The research also made clear that forgiveness is a skill that can be taught to people suffering from all kinds of wounds and grievances. People who worked with this process became more confident, less depressed, less anxious, and more compassionate, reported increased self

esteem and saw reduced blood pressure, body aches and muscle tension, and improved physical vitality.

Joey was losing perspective, he had to dig further to find his grievance story of what it was that he was not getting. He was putting himself down, felt a failure and was dwelling on “How could this have happened.” Joey narrated a deep sense of lose, “I feel that all the rituals and sense of family are gone.” He stated that, “I wanted to get Judy to try to save our relationship.” The first step in the forgiveness process is to Know what you feel so you can allow empathy to produce a “non-denial” of feelings. Joey’s symptoms were from a lack of perspective. He needed to widen his lens to view what is the “wrong” that hurts him. His good side, persona, which was his strong sense of responsibility and kindness, was being constantly overtaken by his shadow side of anger at himself and Judy for not having a successful marriage. Joey who was very visual and did photography as a hobby was asked to view his presenting problem of grief and guilt as if looking through a narrow lens. Here he reiterated his presenting pain of lose. He then was asked to widen the lens, seeing the ends of the room and even further the problems of the world. When it was suggested that he quickly return to his presenting problem, he remarked, “I guess ten years from now this problem may not be so significant.”

Joey began to see that his feelings are real, but he was losing perspective. His family of origin was discussed in regard to his upbringing. “I spent so much time alone as a kid, both of my parents worked long hours and I was a ‘latch key’ child.” His grievance now evolved to match his present feeling of loneliness, sadness and disappointment regarding Judy’s decision to move on; normal yet still painful. This brought Joey to understand that Forgiveness is for him and inevitably with others. This helped him better understand his newly articulated feelings and accept the second stage of forgiveness which is to make a commitment to achieve peace.

Joey was now able to experience his hurt as being in the present. Prior to this he was dwelling and stuck in “what if..” thinking. Forgiveness is not about minimizing his hurt it is about changing the grievance story. Forgiveness does not even necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning their action. It is to set a goal to let yourself go to a spiritual side that does not blame or hinder your well being. It is in a sense a way for Joey to stop reliving the grievance and dwelling on the negative. Joey articulated a goal to fix up his apartment and to resolve his loneliness by creating an environment and life style that would fulfill his wishes and desires. This was Joey’s third stage in the process of moving toward peace. However like all change, one has to support the new awareness otherwise old habits will sabotage the process.

Choosing to forgive is choosing health and not being a victim. Getting the right perspective on what is happening which is the forth step in the forgiveness process was crucial for Joey since he was beating himself up to the point of hurting himself. He now recognized that his primary distress was coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset he was suffering now, not what offended him two minutes or even ten years ago. Uncomplicated grief is easy to handle, i.e. you missed your movie or the grocer was out of your favorite food. Complicated grief is when you credit your bitter bank and become a millionaire in bitterness. He was harboring resentment toward Judy and blaming himself for the failed marriage. The gap between what he wanted and what he got was the status to his health. Since life says “no” in so many ways, Joey had to recognize that this it is part of the natural suffering we encounter every day. As Richard

Carlson wrote “don’t sweat the small stuff.” How serious we take ourselves manifests in how we balance our mind and body. We need to make peace with the “no.” Joey was now able to go over his marriage and realize that it takes two to create problems in a relationship. The more he kept this perspective the more he was able to see how he and Judy were so very different and had not addressed the consequences of their different temperaments.

The next thing (step 5) for Joey was to further support his recognition to what was wrong and how it manifested into his present pain. This was to encourage him to have positive emotions. At the moment he began to take a step backward he was instructed to practice the Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT) to soothe his body’s flight or fight response. Joey made a commitment to choose a life view that he desired to live within. PERT is a simple exercise of taking soft deep belly breathes and thinking of what it is that one is grateful of. Joey felt grateful for his wonderful relationship with his daughter and the fun they had sharing their photos. He took to the exercise quickly since it relieved his physical anxiety and eventually the emotional pain that accompanied it.

Joey was able to move forward into the sixth step of forgiving after mastering the relaxation exercises and understanding how he can avoid the “fight or flight mode” that was taking its toll on him. Giving up expecting things from those who will not give them to you was not easy for him, since he was for many years demanding that Judy match his desires and wishes of a happy loving relationship. There are certain unenforceable rules that strengthen the grievance story. If we cling to a grievance we will live the grievance. We cannot demand a return to desire. By letting go and softening himself Joey became more vulnerable but more human. Learning to forgive is accepting that smart people can do stupid things and good people have good intentions. John Welshons writes in his recent book *When Prayers Aren’t Answered*, (Novato, California: New World Library: 2007, p.151) that “.the acceptance of things as they are in this context does not imply complacency...the acceptance of things as they are is merely intended to alleviate suffering we habitually create in our minds with the desire to change things we simply cannot change.”

Joey now was putting his energy in a positive place (step 7). He developed a strong sense of self compassion. It is what he learned from his personal suffering. He now was truly embracing his positive intention to have a loving relationship. He realized that he could not write off Judy because she hurt him. It just did not work out and their karma was beyond their control. When Joey applied his intent in way that represented his desires he could visualize the potential of eventually having a relationship that may meet his needs. Releasing him from blaming allowed Joey to begin to evolve for the future. Joey was able to accept that he was fallible and has choices to have noble intents.

Joey eventually accepted that the whole process came down to remembering that a life well lived was his eventual goal (step 8). Instead of focusing on his wounded feelings, and thereby giving Judy unnecessary power, he now learned to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around him. He was able to say with conviction that “It is my choice not to define myself by anyone who may have hurt me.” Lastly Joey amended his original grievance story to remind himself of his heroic choice to forgive and move on.